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Ministry of Health
Office of the Provincial Health Officer

A BETTER DIET WILL REDUCE HEALTH-CARE COSTS

VANCOUVER – The Provincial Health Officer's 2005 annual report finds B.C.'s commitment to a healthier, fitter population is the best way to reduce future health-care costs and provide British Columbians with the benefits a safe, nutritious diet can bring to their lives.

"We can reduce health-care costs and broaden the ability of all British Columbians to access safe and nutritious food if we pay more attention to what we eat, reduce our portions and remain physically active. These are all basic health tenets," said Provincial Health Officer Dr. Perry Kendall. "However, if we are to achieve a healthier society overall and see improvements across all sectors of B.C. society, we also need to ensure that seniors, people living with disabilities, single parent families and others living on low incomes have access to safe and nutritious food."

B.C. still compares unfavourably with the national average on low-income measures and higher shelter costs are seriously impacting lower-income households' ability to purchase safe and nutritious food and maintain a healthier lifestyle.

A Statistics Canada survey in 2004 found 40 per cent of British Columbians over the age of 18 were overweight, more than any other province with the exception of Prince Edward Island. The survey also found B.C. had the lowest rate of obesity at 19 per cent, marginally under the national rate of 23 per cent.

British Columbians continue to consume high-calorie, low-nutrient fast food in larger portions, forego the recommended food groups and lead more passive lives driving to and from work, despite years of public awareness campaigns. Higher shelter costs are impacting lower-income households' ability to purchase safe and nutritious food and maintain a healthier lifestyle.

"In British Columbia, we have access to an ever increasing variety of locally produced foods, the influence of foreign cuisines for our menus and all manner of recreational activities," said Kendall. "One third of cancers and the accompanying burden to families and the health-care system could be avoided if we followed a few basic rules; ate more fruit, vegetables and grains and minimized intake of some fats to maintain a normal weight and exercised regularly."

The report summarizes much of the dietary research of the past two decades, examines the food supply, food sources and the food-borne pathogens that can threaten public health. 'Food, Health and Well-Being in British Columbia' also examines the impacts of unhealthy diets, the availability of pertinent databases and why some British Columbians may not have access to safe and nutritious food.

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The report contains a number of recommendations, which include:

- Promoting healthy eating and physical activity in schools.
- Replacing unhealthy food and drinks in schools with healthy food and drinks.
- Making physical activity mandatory up to Grade 12.
- Encouraging employers to support baby-friendly practices and provide appropriate places for mothers to breastfeed.
- Government to commit to a healthy eating and food security strategy.
- Adjusting income supports to reflect the actual costs of healthy eating.
- Investing in chronic disease prevention and management.
- Improving the housing conditions and economic and educational opportunities for Aboriginal people.
- Promoting community planning that encourages physical activity.
- Buying locally and supporting the local food industry.
- Implementing even more effective surveillance systems to detect food hazards and emerging trends and diseases.
- Continuing to support community kitchens, community gardens and farm markets.
- Maintaining policy to protect agricultural land.
- Regulating and monitoring food industry marketing approaches more closely.
- Labelling of all genetically altered food to provide consumers with choices.

The full report can be downloaded or read online at www.healthservices.gov.bc.ca/pho/

-30-

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